KADIN

ÇALIŞMALARINA SOSYOLOJİK, KÜLTÜREL ve EDEBİ BİR BAKIŞ

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1.BÖLÜM

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: TOWARDS A FEMINIST RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF POWER AND AGENCY

Associate Professor Barbara Dell'Abate ÇELEBİ

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: TOWARDS A FEMINIST RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF POWER AND AGENCY

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to investigate the issue of women empowerment and try to reconceptualize in a feminist perspective the issues of oppression, power and agency. As a literature scholar I have been working on literature by women and on the representation of women in literature for many years now and I am interested in the ways in which various types of oppressions influence various types of women from different backgrounds and how each woman reacts differently. I try to understand the link between power, oppression and agency and each woman's capacity to resist, accommodate, act independently or become an accomplice to it. This paper does not aim to give solutions to women's oppression but to work towards a better understanding of the dynamics of intersecting oppressions and gender inequalities.

My work as a scholar is not solely concerned with the analysis of singular literary texts but I am interested in the investigation of the social, cultural, ideological context within which writers work and how they conceive the world so I investigate their status as "knowers". I am particularly interested in epistemology or better in the epistemological ground of the texts and learnt to question the dominant, universal knowledges that we are accustomed to give for granted. According to Sandra Harding's definition, epistemology constitutes an overarching theory of knowledge (1987). While for Patricia Hill Collins epistemology:

"investigates the standards used to assess knowledge or why we believe what we believe to be true. Far from being the apolitical study of truth, epistemology points to the ways in which power relations shape who is believed and why" (2000: 252).
So, it is very important when setting a research, any research that can be in literature, science. economics to specify on which terrain we are going to plant the seeds of our research and from where we are taking the water to feed our plants. And this is what I am going to do now before starting.

1. THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL APPROACH

At that basis of my epistemological approach is feminist epistemology, that is to say the commitment to investigate from women's perspective, so from a subaltern perspective the dominant knowledges, the generally accepted universal accounts we accept a priori in our lives and in our researches. I write this article from the standpoint of a scholar and a woman, so I utilize my specific "situation" or "lived reality" (De Beauvoir, 1989: 77) as the perspective I assume in this essay. Moreover, my researches are rooted within a Foucauldian perspective and I am particularly interested in the relation Foucault establishes between representation, knowledge and power. According to Foucault language use cannot be taken solely as an innocuous activity of representation and language is a site where ideology, power, and representation are contested. This is certainly interesting for someone working essentially on language, texts and discourse.

However, next to the study of "representations" I believe in the analysis of the "referent", the context, and in this I got quite close to feminist social theory and to standpoint and materialist feminism. For the study of oppression, I borrow from feminist social theory the methodology of intersectionality and of the analysis of the matrix of domination. In utilizing the specific methodology of intersectionality, I rely on Black Feminist Thought and in particular on the work of Patricia Hill Collins (1990) that has utilized intersectionality to highlight the multiple oppressions of black women.
For the study of the issue of agency in this paper I relied on the structuration theory and the duality of structure elaborated by Anthony Giddens.

2. WOMEN LITERATURE AND FEMINISM

To study women's literature means to come close to feminist studies and to many different views and ideas. 1st wave, 2nd wave, 3rd wave feminism, liberal, socialist, materialist, radical, Queer studies,

postcolonial feminist studies and terms as essentialism, difference, constructivism, performativity, etc. Feminist theories and feminist social criticism is a fascinating and evolving domain that differently from other literary approaches as structuralism, semiotics, hermeneutics, new historicism etc. is political at its roots. Feminism like Marxism wants to change the world and more precisely the perspective humanity has of women.

There are many views on how to do this within feminism and word "equality" is probably the best known. Equal rights, equal opportunities. Laws need still to be modified towards more attention to gender discrimination but in the last 50 years we have arrived to a "formal equality of form" that however can be translated in a "substantial inequality of content" in respect to gender equality. But probably equality is not the right word to use.

Do women want to be equal to men to be valued as individuals? Do women in their biological difference need to behave like men to be accepted as human beings? And also, or more important, can we talk in the name of an equality of all women to all men? We are mostly women in this room. Are we all equal? Certainly not. We are different.

Equal opportunities policies have given women the opportunity to be equal under the laws to men. Equal opportunities in education, in job perspectives, in medical care but it has failed completely in creating gender unbiased societies. To be equal but different as affirmed by Neoliberal feminism still means to be different.

Women are allowed within men's circles but it is clear that men and women are different. To be embodied as a woman is not something that needs to be refused. I can be actually happy to be biologically sexed as woman, to be able to give life, to have specific kind of hormones. Women don't have to behave like men to be happy. So how can women be able to be "considered" or better "valued" as men without being sexed as man?

The issue here is not equality. It is not even a question of gender. Developments in feminist theory have demonstrated that gender as a category of analysis cannot be abstracted from a particular context while other factors are held stable; gender can never be observed as a "pure" or solitary influence. If feminism is to liberate women it must address virtually all forms of domination because women fill the ranks of every category of oppressed people. The key work here is not equality but power. We could say that most men have power and most women don't. Or better, it is not that simple. What we can say is that the issue of equality needs to be understood within the broader issue of power,

empowerment and agency and this needs to be done considering each woman in her specific "situation" and not as generalized and homogeneous "women".

3. CONCEPTIONS OF POWER

But what do we mean by the word power? There are two basic conceptions of power. The first is power as a simple capacity to act. In Weber's definition power is "the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action (Weber, 1978: 926). So, power in this sense may be used as an instrument of domination. In the same line for Mann power is "the ability to pursue and attain goals". (Mann, 1986: 6)

A second view of power considers it fundamentally dependent on the consent of those over whom it is exercised, so on the basis of its legitimacy. Both views consider power as essentially repressive and do not keep into consideration differences of gender.

Power, or better the exercise of power, intended as exercise of domination, quite ironically has been considered as a masculine activity and preoccupation by both feminist and antifeminist and quite inappropriate to women or feminists.

However, to understand how power relations are constructed and how power is exercised would give us a better understanding of the roots of our communities and how to make them a more equal place. As affirmed by Nancy Hartsock "different theories of power rest on different ontologies and epistemologies and a feminist rethinking of power requires attention to its epistemological grounding and both do not keep in consideration differences of gender" (1985:3)

The level of epistemology is important because it determines which question merit investigation, which interpretative frameworks will be used to analyze findings and to what use any ensuing knowledge will be put.

4. THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL BASIS OF POWER

When it comes to social injustice, groups have competing interests that often generate conflict. This relationship is far more complex than a simple model of permanent oppressors and perpetual victims. Rethinking the binary between oppressed and oppressor obligates us to reconceptualize power more broadly. Power relation are to be analyzed both via their intersections, for example of racism and sexism as well as cross domains, namely structural, disciplinary, cultural and interpersonal.

As highlighted by Patricia Hill Collins in her Black feminist thought there are few pure victims or oppressors for each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppressions which form everyone's lives. As such "an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed" (1990:225). So, to a binary logic we need to substitute a dialectical analysis of power.

4.1 Michael Foucault

In this context Foucault approach to power has been very useful to feminism. For Foucault power is not something that individuals or groups possess but is an intangible entity that circulates within a particular matrix of domination and to which individual subjectivity frames human actions. In Foucauldian terms, power can be not only coercive or disciplinary but discursive (productive). It works through the diffusion of knowledge linked to various fields. Knowledge, for Foucault, is in itself neither true nor false but is strictly linked to power as it sets and define for each specific period and culture the boundaries within which statements are to be judged true and false. Within Foucault's theory of power, a "regime of truth" is the circular relation that truth has with the systems of power that simultaneously produce and sustain it, and at the same time the effects of power which truth induces and which extend it. Truth in Foucault's use has a history. It is historically grounded and relative to the specific context we take into consideration. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth – that is the types of discourses it accepts and makes function as true. These regimes of truth concur in the creation and are at the same time the consequence of specific discursive formations that constitute a continuous changing set of conditions regulating the range of possible articulations at any time; yet with each articulation the set of conditions shifts and adapts. Each individual, in this case each woman, is situated contextually and historically at the intersection of various factors (class, race, gender, nation) and are subjected to specific matrix of domination. This creates potential for both multiple and conflicting experience of subordination and power that requires a wider ranging and complex terrain of analysis.

4.2 Other feminisms

This Foucauldian vision of power is shared by US Third World Feminism, Multicultural Feminism, Chicana feminism and Black Feminism epistemology. We can trace it back to Chicana critique of "sexist racism" of late 1970s and their struggle against "racial, sexual,

heterosexual and class oppression and their task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppressions are interlocking"
(Combahee River Collective, 1979: 275). In the same direction Andre Lorde calls this kind of logic the "hierarchy of oppressions" (1987) and Elisabeth Martinez (1993) later terms it the "Oppression Olympics". Once set the epistemological grounds of our analysis of power within a dialectic opposed to a binary logic, we need to find the methodological instruments that can allow us to study this "hierarchy of oppressions" and this methodology can be found in intersectionality.

5. METHODOLOGICAL INSTRUMENTS

In 1989 Kimberlé Crenshaw, a professor of law, coined the term "intersectionality" in a paper as a way to help explain the oppression of African-American women. This concept has been further elaborated in 1990 by Patricia Hill Collins in her first edition of Black Feminist Thought where she writes:

"Intersectionality refers to the intersection of different forms of oppression for example gender, class, race and these oppressions work together to produce injustice. [...] The matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are organized".

(2000: 18).

Intersectionality refers to the intersection of different forms of oppression for example gender, class, race and these oppressions work together to produce injustice. The matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are organized.

5.1 Intersectionality and the matrix of domination

Like feminist epistemology, intersectionality conceptualizes power relationally but not in a binary fashion. While much of feminist theory has engaged in decades of fraught conversations about the role of identity and experiences grounded in identity, intersectionality theory instead relies on situational contingency to acknowledge and incorporate the permeability of the binary between oppressed and oppressor. Intersectional contingency is distinct from the notion both that context matters and that individual identity is all that matters. Using the situation as a lens does not reify personal experience, for individual can experience a situation in question in very different ways. Nor does it reify the structural aspects that shape such situations, assisting in holding individuals responsible for their actions in a situation. The quotidian

choices between analytically distinct multiple identities does not necessarily signify two warring souls. It could in fact reflect the consistency of an integrated identity, not an analytically fractured multiple category identity. Here this element of contingency continues the second intellectual project of intersectionality where the ontological relationship between categories are mutually constitutive.

Intersectionality refuses both the liberal idea of a universal "woman" representing all others and the standpoint theory of woman being able in the name of a specific characteristic as black, lesbian, white etc., to speak for all others. By locating the various single woman at the crossing of multiple individual and social factors and relations of power, intersectionality supports the idea that everyone is located in multiple, overlapping ways and every woman is different or equal to other women or to other men in respect to specific factors.

This matrix can be summarized along two main axes:

1- Four interconnected domains of power: a) Structural, b) Disciplinary, c) Hegemonic and d) Interpersonal
2- Multiple intersectional factors characterizing the specific positioning of women within their society. In this case I have chosen seven factors: 1) Class, 2) Race, 3) Gender, 4) Religion, 5)Marital Status, 6) Age, 7) Nationality.

This methodology of research allows to highlight and analyze conflicting experiences of power and subordination, denying the fixity of identities, showing the capacity that each individual has or has not to act independently.

Each woman is embedded in a matrix of domination made of laws and institutions (Structural domain), bureaucracy (Disciplinary domain), cultural and ideological (Hegemonic domain) and influenced by every day interactions (Interpersonal domain). However, her capacity to resist, accommodate, act independently or become an accomplice to it depends also on the factors characterizing her singular being: her gender, class, race, religion, marital status, age, nationality etc.

When looking in more details at the domain of power it seems clear that structural and disciplinary domains are linked, or better are accepted by the individuals through the work of the hegemonic domain that has the role to bind the individual to the society to which s/he belongs and whose ideas/value are reinforced or denied according to his/her personal biography.

It is within this level that play a fundamental role the multiple factors making up his/her identity. At the intersections of these multiple factors we can locate the single woman that we need to remember are also influenced by the discourse of classism, colonialism, patriarchy, gendering, femininity, religion that constitute the hegemonic domain. Furthermore, these discourses are then translated in practices (structural and disciplinary domains) and arrive to the level of every day social interactions (interpersonal domain).

As this model clearly shows, the dialectic relationship linking oppression and agency is far more complex than a simple model of oppressors and oppressed would suggest. Are women all oppressed? Are they oppressors? Do they have or can show agency?

As Foucault's notion of subjectivation (*assujetissement*) suggests, discourses which constitute the subject are at the same time the condition of possibility of its empowerment. Discursive constructions are stabilized through a forcible reiteration but it is through this reiteration that "gaps and fissures" are opened. These instabilities constitute the possibility for the object constituted to escape or exceed the norms.

5.2 Agency: the theory of structuration and the concept of duality of structure

As a consequence, the activities of human beings though influenced by various factors and by different matrix of domination cannot however be understood as simply situated and constrained. The relationship between subjectivity and social structure needs to recognize the intervention of human agency. An answer to these issues is provided by the theory of structuration elaborated in the 1980s by the sociologist Anthony Giddens and that involves the concept of duality of structure which expresses the mutual dependence of structure and agency.

According to this theory "social structures are both constituted by human agency and yet, at the same time are the very medium of this constitution" (Giddens,1979: 121). This means that the relation between human beings and structures is dynamic as they do not simply reproduce existing structures but modify them even as they are shaped by them.

This notion of the duality of structures allows to move away from a purely constraining forces model by allowing the social agents to produce these structures anew in the process of reproducing them. It is important also to keep in mind that for Giddens "structure" is not external but internal to agents in the form of memory traces (1984: 25).

It is agents who bring "structure" into being, and it is "structure" which produces the possibility of agency. At each point of structural

reproduction there is also the potential for change as individuals can transform the traditional "rules" which have structured their past interaction by modifying it.

Why change does not happen that often and that sudden? Why routine is kept? Giddens answers these questions by introducing the concept of ontological security, a concept he derived from R.D. Laing and that is a psychological state that is equivalent to feeling "at home" with oneself and the world, and is associated with the experience of low or manageable levels of anxiety that contributes to the search for an overly consensual and static social universe.

In practice, social change will flow from an amalgam of incremental change, i.e. change that occurs as an unintended outcome of social reproduction itself, reflexive monitoring of their actions and unintended consequences. Structuration theory acknowledges the potential of the social actor for self-reflexivity and critique so providing a theoretical basis for varying degrees of dissent, resistance and potential for change.

The single writer is the consequence of hegemonic discourses that lead to structural and disciplinary control mechanisms. However, at the interpersonal level various factors influence her choices. In time she can confirm and reiterate or modify with her actions the structure. So, we have a synchronic analysis of one moment in time and a diachronic perspective that allows to look for modifications in the practices due to the single agent's agency.

CONCLUSION

The methodology envisioned in this paper assumes 3 steps of analysis:

1-*Matrix of Domination and Domains of Power analysis:*

In the first step, we proceed to the analysis of the hegemonic, structural and disciplinary domains characterizing the specific country and historical time considered. We proceed to the analysis of the hegemonic, structural and disciplinary domains characterizing the specific country and historical time considered. When looking in more details at the domain of power it seems clear that structural and disciplinary domains are linked, or better are accepted by the individuals through the work of the hegemonic domain that has the role to bind the individual to the society to which she belongs and whose ideas/value are reinforced or denied according to her personal biography.

2-Matrix of Domination and Domains of Power analysis +Intersectional analysis:

As a second step, at the interpersonal level, we integrate the Matrix of Domination and Domains of Power analysis with an Intersectional analysis to locate the factors characterizing the single writer.

3-*Matrix of Domination and Domains of Power + Intersectionality + Structuration analysis:*

In the third step then we look diachronically at the domains of power and at the reiteration or modification the writer has made in the specific. In this last step we insert time in the analysis and so the possibility of agency. Within time, the single woman can confirm, reiterate or modify with her actions the structure. So, to the synchronic analysis of one moment in time we add a diachronic perspective that allows to look for reiteration or modifications in the practices due to the modification the single have brought in the specific.

CONCLUSION

Viewing domination itself as encompassing intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality and nationality points to the significance of these oppressions in shaping the overall organization of a particular matrix of domination. Similarly, personal identities constructed around individual understandings of race, class, gender, sexuality and nation define each individual's unique biography. Under some circumstances race trumps everything else. In the case of Asian women, race, gender and imperialism simultaneously shape their life experience

This paper aimed to show that the complexity of intersecting oppressions and individual identity can be investigated at the micro and macro levels with the support of the methodological tools of intersectionality, the matrix of domination and structuration theory that allow for a more precise and nuanced analysis of each individual, equal by gender but different by lived experience

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